A GLIMPSE OF THE REAL WORLD: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF COMPULSORY PUBLIC RELATIONS INTERNSHIPS FROM AN INDUSTRY AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Katharina Wolf, MA PR MCIPR MPRIA
Curtin University of Technology
k.wolf@curtin.edu.au

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Introduction

Practica and compulsory work placements are not new to higher education and have long formed a crucial element of the curriculum, particularly in health and education. However, while work integrated learning is becoming increasingly popular across disciplines, Kerr (2005) discovered that *real life* experience and industry placements as part of higher education training are particularly emphasised by the public relations industry, even more so than in other communication disciplines, such as advertising. In comparison to traditional professions, such as law and medicine, public relations (PR) is still in its infancy. Consequently, there is increased global pressure to ensure the professionalisation of the industry, which ultimately emphasises the need for stronger and more successful partnerships between academia and practitioners. Australian universities introduced dedicated PR majors as early as 1970, followed by a comprehensive accreditation process, introduced by the Public Relations Institute of Australia in 1991 (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2008). In addition to an industry based *advisory committee*, a professional internship, practicum or work experience component is a core criterion for accreditation. As a result, hundreds of public relations students actively seek out work integrated learning opportunities every semester, while many other programs have abandoned structured, assessed work placements on the basis that they are "purely too difficult to manage and supervise" (verbal feedback from former Professional Marketing Practice Unit Controller). The PR Major at Curtin University of Technology, based within the School of Marketing, is a typical example. Every year, around 150 final year PR students venture out to spend a minimum of 20 days full-time -or part-time equivalent- in a public relations, communication or (corporate) communications department, or consultancy. In direct contrast to this, the Marketing Major at Curtin has recently abandoned its optional professional practice, stating administrative and organisational difficulties.

In a recent report, the Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) identified eight core Graduate Skills: communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organisation, self-management, learning and technology (2002). However, research by Rundle-Thile et al.'s (2005) into Australian-based marketing courses indicated that merely 3% covered all eight DEST skills in their curriculum. Curtin's PR Major is currently undergoing a major review and re-mapping exercise as part of Curtin's Curriculum 2010 (C2010). Centred around Curtin's recently re-defined nine Graduate Attributes (Curtin University of Technology, 2006), which are closely aligned with the DEST skills, curriculums are being streamlined, with a focus on *hand on* learning experiences and industry relevant learning outcomes. As final year unit RP393 is an industry-based capstone unit, which should at least theoretically embrace all nine Graduate Attributes. Students are provided with an opportunity to apply skills and theories acquired during earlier stages of their studies in a real life setting. This starts with the students' responsibility to find their own placement, which gives them early exposure to job searching and effective self-presentation skills (Green, Quin & Luca, 2005).

Despite a lack of enthusiasm by some academics, Bates (2004) argues that students often refer to placements as the most significant part of their undergraduate program. This is certainly the case with the PR393 Professional Practice unit, however, due to a lack of systematic research Unit Controllers rely

predominantly on informal feedback. Despite the reported popularity of the unit, response rates to the university-wide eVALUate end of semester questionnaire have been disappointingly low, which might be explained by the fact that the majority of students commence their placement before the start of the actual semester and have, by the time the evaluation is due, already distanced themselves from their studies, with a focus on graduate positions and their future professional careers. Additionally, despite a high overall satisfaction rate, the placement unit has traditionally scored lower than the university- and faculty-wide average on a number of pre-determined eVALUate items, such as *learning resources, quality of teaching* and the quality of ongoing *feedback* received. eVALUate focuses solely on levels of agreement and does not take *unsure/not applicable* responses into account. As a result, the need was identified to conduct an in depth study into the perceived value and effectiveness of the current unit format, based on feedback from the units two key stakeholder groups: students and pracititioners/supervisors.

Methodology

This study provides a first hand insight into the perceived effectiveness of the compulsory, final year public relations placement unit at Curtin University of Technology, based on survey responses from 26 industry supervisors and 84 students' end of semester unit evaluations. Students' development during the course of their internships was closely monitored and mapped, based on comments posted on the unit's *Reflective Blog*. Additionally, verbal and written feedback from both sides were analysed for a richer, more rounded insight into the strengths and pitfalls of the program. A number of studies have been conducted into stakeholders' perceptions of placement and work integrated learning units. While Gower & Rebers's (2006) surveyed current PR undergraduate students, the assumption can arguably be made that as not only the unit but also students' time at university is coming to an end, PR393 students will be able to give more rounded and insightful feedback in regards to the perceived effectiveness of not only the unit but also the PR curriculum, similar as in Crebert et al.'s (2004) study of graduates. Taking an action research approach, the aim of this study is to use feedback to further build on the strengths of the unit and to ultimately make student learning more effective and relevant to the industry's needs.

"Provide students with realistic expectations in own ability - they won't be asked to manage a crisis"[1]

Recent PR393 supervisors were invited to complete a brief, confidential, short answer-email survey. Industry representatives were also invited to join a *Thank You Sundowner*, which provided a further opportunity to gather qualitative feedback.

Unit strength | Supervisors were asked to state the top three strengths of the Placement unit. Responses grouped nicely into three key clusters:
1. An opportunity for the students to gain a realistic insight into what public relations is like in the *real world*: *"Giving graduates a chance to look at what real world PR work is like"*
2. An opportunity for employers to have a close look at new talent: *"Chance for employer to REALLY see what someone is like"*
3. A forum for academics in which to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum and teaching practice: *"Gives lecturers the opportunity to see if the message is getting across"*

Overall the feedback was highly positive. All supervisors stated they would take on placement students in the future, with only two exceptions: one being a government department with restrictions on external placement students. The other practitioner had just employed the most recent intern and simply did not have any office space available.

Key skills | The majority of practitioners agreed with previous findings in that they were looking for recruits that could "hit the ground running" as noted by Kerr (2005). When asked about key skills employers are looking for, feedback was largely clustered around the perceived lack of (low level)

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[1] Unit feedback provided by a recent supervisor in regards to unrealistic placement expectations

generic skills, as previously identified by various authors (Bates, 2004; Green et al., 2005; Kerr, 2005), ranging from effective CV writing and interview skills to the ability to pick up the phone, communicate confidently with a wide range of stakeholders and IT skills, to enthusiasm, professionalism, initiative and team skills. A number of supervisors also mentioned the need for graduate's work ethics and attitudes to match their organisational values, which is particularly relevant due to the small, tight knit teams PR practitioners usually work in. Supervisors furthermore emphasised a need for more and longer placements as well as general work experience, including voluntary work, which ultimately ensure that students gain a more realistic picture and expectations of the industry.

Industry needs | However, when commenting on the skills needed to match the *industry's needs*, answers started to get a more strategic focus. In order to succeed in the field students were perceived to need critical analytical and strategic thinking skills. They also needed to be able to critique and challenge academic skills and disciplinary knowledge as well as to contextualise subject specific practices. These comments build on the assumption that students are already sufficiently equipped with subject specific, technical skills, as a basis for the development of higher-level, strategic abilities. This point was further emphasised by a number of practitioners, who particularly highlighted the need for practice orientated, up to date academics, with either strong industry contacts or consultancy capabilities: *"Ensure there are lecturers still practising PR or networking with PR professionals to stay ahead of industry changes"*.

Improvement | The most common suggestions was to increase the length of the actual placement, as 20 days only provide a very restricted opportunity for students to familiarise themselves with the organisation. With minor exceptions, responses also indicated that supervisors preferred to host students for an intense period of time, rather than one or two days a week. Responses highlighted some confusion about the format of the unit and expectations. In the past, it had been the students' responsibility to arrange a placement, discuss the anticipated responsibilities and agree on the placement duration and mode. As discussed before, this has been seen as a key element of the learning experience. Feedback indicated, however, that there is a need for more contact between the university and supervisors, as well as more guidance to be provided by the Unit Controller, in form of guides, information material and follow up phone calls. While many organisations cater for at least one student a semester and are therefore very comfortable with the process, new supervisors indicated they felt overwhelmed.

"I really recommend this unit to anyone wishing to work in the public relations industry"[2]

The analysis of student feedback confirms that the placement provides them with an opportunity to gain a realistic insight into the *real world*. Based on the analysis of structured and informal student feedback (verbal, emails, eVALUate, Reflective Blog), a clear, five-step *Placement Life Cycle* (PLC) emerged:

1. **Concerns & uneasiness |** No matter if they had worked before or not, the initial search for a suitable placement, as well as the first days in a new environment, are a very stressful period for students, with many doubting their ability and their career choice. Even for seasoned part-time workers, the exposure to a professional, corporate, office environment left many students feeling uneasy:

"I have to admit that I was quite nervous and anxious"
"I came into this unit with real dread as I was not prepared to face up to the reality of the 'real world"
"It was an environment that i had created in my head that was scary and full of important professional people!!"
"I don't know about anyone else but I found this extremely daunting" [calling journalists]

2. **Settling in |** After a short while, students start to settle in and become more comfortable:

"People in my company really appreciate what I do and do not just ignore me like I thought"

They also start to appreciate the relevance of 2.5+ years of studies and the curriculum's close alignment with the industry's needs:

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[2] Student feedback provided as part of the end of year eVALUate satisfaction survey

"Its [sic] amazing just to see how everything we have learnt actually is used and is relevant!"
"I have learnt so much and actually noticed that whatever was taught […] was actually put into real test in the real world."

3. **Realistic expectations |** As time goes by, students start to gain a more rounded and realistic insight into work pressures and expectations:
"This [event at work] threw light on a fact I had known, but failed to really recognise until this week"
"I have learnt there is a giant leap in standard" [between university assignments and writing for corporate clients]"
"I now understand the importance of deadlines"
"PR is definitely one of those jobs where it can be glamorous at times and other times you are down and your hands and knees in the rain picking up name tags for an event, feeling terribly sorry for yourself"
- as well as an appreciation for continuous professional development (CPD):
"I have been able to see that what we have learned at university is not everything - we have more to learn from our 'elders'"

4. **Confidence |** Towards the end of their internship students start to gain more confidence in their own abilities, often based on the feedback and recognition they have received in their placement organisations. Observing the transformation, particularly in some of the quieter and shyer students, has been absolutely remarkable.
"I have found it [the unit] so so helpful. The big wide world is lots less intimidating"
"I do agree that it was very satisfying! It is exciting being given a task and having the confidence in your abilities to know you can do it well"
"I really come to appreciate how vitally important prac is and feel a lot more confident about entering the working world once I finish uni this semester."

5. Satisfaction and recognition of placement value | Following initial concerns, reluctance and even complaints by students that they had to pay tuition fees for an individual tuition unit, centred around in which they had to provide *free labour*, retrospective comments about the value of the Professional Placement were overwhelmingly positive:
"Nothing beats experience and I never realised how important it as until participating in this unit"
"This unit I think has been the most beneficial out of all the units I have taken. While other units prepare you for the real world this one puts you in it – and I think this is what everyone [other business school students] need"
"Personally, I enjoyed this unit a lot and wasn't expecting that it would be fun to actually work in a company for 20 days"
"If this had not been a compulsory unit I doubt I would have been able to push myself to get out there and the same type of experience that this unit has enabled me to get. It really helps to push you out of your comfort zone."
Once students had overcome the first hurdle, many who had originally planned to only cover the minimum requirement of 20 days, decided to extend their placement experience, either in their current host organisation, as they felt comfortable with the team and often reluctant to leave a project half way through, or to actively seek out other work experience opportunities to add value to their CV. Additional perceived benefits of the unit were:
- A *trial run* for the graduate application and job hunting process
- An opportunity to build a professional portfolio
- Gaining written references that would help when applying for jobs
- Forming networks and contacts with other students and graduates but also practitioners, which will be very valuable in the future

"Thank you PR 393 – you are the platform that has kick started my career![3]"

Every semester, around 10% of students are offered a position as a direct result of their placement. This number is increasing, with employers using the professional placement as an opportunity to screen suitable candidates in an increasingly competitive job market. This includes employers who are prepared to offer students part time positions while they complete the final year of their studies, with the promise to upgrade to a full time permanent position upon graduation. A significant percentage of students gain employment as an indirect result of their placement, based on contacts made, confidence gained and the opportunity to add relevant work experience to their Curriculum Vitae.

Discussion

The placement experience has undoubtedly demonstrated to students that academic success is not the only attribute for successful employment (Crebert et al., 2004) and a consequent career in the field. However, it is often not until after students have completed their first Placement Life Cycle (PLC) that they see the benefits and fully comprehend that a generic skills set and particularly the right attitude are crucial for the successful completion of an industry placement. Being required to send all students into the industry for a minimum period of 20 days is a true test for the quality of a degree course. Non-accredited competitors have taken advantage of their position by only allowing top performing students – the perceived *crème de la crème* – to complete industry placements. With increased competition for internships, due to growing intake numbers and impending PRIA accreditation of two competitors' PR courses, there is more pressure on students to be prepared, strategic and professionally. Feedback indicated that the quality of placements varies greatly. Students who opt for perceived *easy* or less challenging options, often realise too late that hey have missed out on a unique opportunity to set themselves up for a career in the field.

The quality of learning experiences depend on student motivation, but also on what Orell (2004) refers to as the placement organisation's *ethos*. Outcomes depend on if the host organisation's focus is on *value added* benefits, i.e. having an extra pair of hand on board, or if supervisors are taking a more strategic, stakeholder-focused perspective, seeking benefits for all parties. A number of recent supervisors are Curtin graduates, who stated that they are keen to "give something back" and to provide students with a more valuable placement experience than they might had ten years ago. However, feedback from supervisors indicates that a large number of practitioners are predominantly concerned about the intern's ability to hit the ground running, with a minimal requirement for further training. Arguably, this focus might shift once the placement organisation considers future employment rather than solely a short term placement commitment with the promise of *free labour*.

While practitioners emphasised the need for generic or *soft* skills, they also emphasised the need for academics to stay in touch with industry developments and to teach the latest, cutting edge techniques, in order to ensure graduates' successful integration in the workplace. While strategic and innovative thinking was valued– at least from a long-term perspective – immediate technical skills, such as writing for different audiences, were perceived as absolutely crucial, to limit the need for on the job training.

Conclusion

Research in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom has illustrated that students who had undertaken a work-integrated learning experience during their course of study were more likely to reflect positively on their university experience and to have achieved employment within their chosen field (Orell, 2004). This was definitely confirmed in this study. Once students had completed their first PLC, the majority was highly appreciative of the placement experience and the quality of their prior education and preparation. The Reflective Blog was only recently introduced, but appears to have succeeded in combating some of the isolation reportedly experienced in earlier semesters. Further research will be necessary to confirm this. Reeders (2000) compared the placement experience to the *wild west,* in direct contrast to the classroom experience, which he perceived as to have a tendency to become too *safe* and

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[3] Student comment on Reflective Blog

bloodless. Student feedback confirmed that although the entire PR Major is centred around work integrated learning and the use of real life clients, case studies and projects, the placement experience pushed many students out of their comfort zone.

As a secondary outcome, this evaluative research project has strengthened the relationship between academia and practitioners, with new ongoing partnerships (guest speakers, real life clients) having been formed as a result. Overall, this investigation has confirmed the value and success of the compulsory placement, with further attention needed to improve industry relationships and additional resources to be made available to support new supervisors.

Supervisors were particularly interested in job ready students that required a minimum of additional training. However, the question arises how far we are prepared to go in our efforts to please the industry and meet practitioners' demands. The 393 *glimpse of the real world* appears to have ensured that the majority of students enter the industry with very realistic expectations, improved real life experience and a growing network of contacts, which will be crucial for their future success. However, as important industry relevance may be, academics should be careful not to try too hard in their efforts to please the industry, by potentially falling into the trap where higher level skills are sacrificed in favour of technical, generic, entry level abilities. It may be time to strike a balance between the industry's immediate interests and higher education institutions' responsibility to prepare students for a successful career in the field, beyond the placement and their first job.

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